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ABSTRACT

As welfare programs have grown more costly, it has become obvious that they merely treat the symptom, poverty, instead of the problem, unemployment. Jobs increasingly require higher levels of skills and better educated workers. Since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 has ended the federal guarantee of benefits to any eligible poor person, welfare programs need to work more closely with vocational education programs to help persons who will lose welfare benefits to gain basic and employability skills. A study in Wood County, Ohio, assessed the basic skills of enrollees in the welfare department's job training program and basic skill needs relative to the qualifications expected of high school graduates. A randomly selected sample of 39 clients took the Survey Form Level A of the Test of Adult Basic Education. Results showed that the participants' average reading grade level was 10.7, their average mathematics grade level was 7.4, and their language skills, 6.8. It was recommended that vocational-technical education programs be used to teach welfare recipients basic and job skills in an integrated manner using state-of-the-art equipment, flexible programs, and an experienced faculty in order for them to enter the work force. (Contains 24 references.) (KC)

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Partnership Between Vocational Institutions and Welfare Programs

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Introduction

At this critical time that *welfare reform* has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-political issues of national concern, it is essential to learn from past experiences and base new initiatives on facts, and to be willing to make the necessary investments that will improve the welfare system. This manuscript is an attempt to identify the skills needs of welfare recipients, and discuss ways of providing employability skills for unemployed or underemployed individuals in order to become self-sufficient.

Legislative History

There is a considerable consensus that the social welfare system must be changed to reward work, encourage personal responsibility, and foster economic independency. With a history of past attempts that have proved less than satisfactory, there is a great deal of concern about what needs to be done for welfare reform to be effective in the future. Since the knowledge

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of where we have come from is essential to understanding where we are going, a historical analysis of previous welfare issues will enable us to better focus on ways of improving social welfare system.

In the middle of the great depression, when nearly 25 percent of Americans were out of work, the Congress passed the Social Security Act of 1935 to help a group of single mothers who were primarily widows, stay out of the workforce and take care of their children. The goal was to reduce child poverty without discouraging work. For this, work-directed mandates have been the focus of welfare reform for the past 30 years (Gueron, 1995). In order to encourage and assist abled individuals to participate in the workforce, since the early 1960s, the federal government has subsidized appropriations for employment and training of disadvantaged persons who have not benefitted from educational opportunities. These programs went into effect with the enactment of the Area Redevelopment Act (ARA) of 1961. ARA established a precedent for federally subsidized training offered in conjunction with loans to companies that agreed to relocate or expand industrial facilities into impoverished areas. The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1963 became the cornerstone of President Johnson's War on Poverty. The Work Incentive (WIN) program was added as an amendment to the Social Security Act to provide training and job placement services to recipients of Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC).

With the passage of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973, major steps were taken toward decentralization the delivery system. About 500 prime sponsors, each representing communities with the population of at least 100,000, were given the responsibility of planning and operating the manpower policy in order to develop programs tailored to community needs. The Youth Employment and Demonstration Project Act (YEDPA)

of 1977 allowed the Carter administration to create and oversee several new programs for youth employment activities. These programs offered tax credits to employers who expanded their workforce by hiring disadvantaged and other groups with special needs (Carnevale, Gainer, and Villet, 1990).

Although annual appropriation for training and employment programs increased from approximately $81 million in 1963 to $11 billion in fiscal year 1979 (Ginzberg, 1980), it was clear that these programs had failed to help emancipate welfare recipients from public dependency. In fact, because the CETA did not give young people the skills they needed for the workforce, it was finally abolished when Ronald Reagan took office.

As the reform process continued, in 1988 the Job Opportunities and Basic Training program (JOBS) was established to change the culture of welfare from *dependency* to *self-sufficiency* (Barnhart, 1992). Funding for the JOBS programs was provided under a capped entitlement, with federal dollars limited to $500 million in fiscal year 1989, $650 million in 1990, $800 million in 1991, and a $1 billion in 1992 and 1993, rising to $1.1 billion in 1994 and $1.3 billion in 1995 (Katz, 1993). Based on a consensus that employment was a principal antidote to welfare dependency, states were required to offer a wide range of work-related activities, including training, various educational programs, community work experience programs (CWEP), and job search.

The main focus of the JOBS was to place emphasis on the importance of work and provide employment opportunities for individuals in the welfare system. To succeed, the welfare system must be restructured to (1) reflect a commitment to self-sufficiency, (2) adequately invest in a useful and relevant education, and (3) facilitate the participation of all abled recipients in the

education and training programs.

The most recent round of reform occurred in 1996, when Congress passed and the President signed the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996." Because there was a widespread agreement that the US welfare system has failed to accomplish its primary objectives of reducing poverty, encouraging work, and eliminating social dependency, the recent Act radically transformed the nation's welfare system. Based on the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, individual states will be more responsible to people's needs, and a federal guarantee of benefits to any eligible poor person will end.

The Need for Reform

When the AFDC was created to support widows or the wives of disabled workers, a large number of people were unemployed, very few middle class women were working, and a woman's place was in the home. The conditions have changed dramatically. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that by the year 2005 the U.S. economy will create 17.7 million new jobs (Hudelson, 1996). Women have entered the workplace in huge numbers, and most mothers on welfare are unmarried, not widows. According to (Gueron, 1995), "Providing long-term support has become much less popular"(p. 6). Yet, today 14 million individuals, most of them single mothers and children receive a monthly welfare check as well as food stamps and medical care that cost the U.S. government a total of 38 billion dollars annually.

Although the central mission of the U.S. social welfare system was to enable the welfare recipients to become self-sufficient, it has created a culture of dependance on public assistance that appears to be, in most cases, permanent and intergenerational. The welfare delivery system

calls for a fundamental reform because, in more than 60 years, its various programs have grown too expensive both socially and economically. Even though the welfare system has continuously placed a great deal of emphasis on ways of providing the recipients, mostly unemployed, with employment opportunities, its various programs currently spend 350 billion dollars annually to support many of the nation's 36 million poor. Obviously there is a need for reform. Why has the system failed to serve its primary purpose of enabling recipients to enjoy the satisfaction of performing an occupation, and gain economic independency? Can the system be fixed?

Senge (1990) noted that "An underlying problem generates symptoms that demand attention. But, the underlying problem is difficult to address either because it is obscure or costly to confront. So people *shift the burden* of their problem to others" (p. 104). The U.S. welfare system has been faced by an underlying socio-economical problem caused by unemployment with poverty as its symptom. It appears that the existing welfare programs have evolved to address the symptoms of the problem rather than its fundamental cause, unemployment. Based on socio-political considerations, politicians may *shift the burden* by expanding, reducing, or placing restrictions on how or when an individual could receive public assistance. In the short-term, this might appeal to a group of taxpayers because it could save a considerable amount of dollars. But, since getting welfare recipients to work is the only way to transform the welfare state (Katz, 1995), in the long-term the problem will resurface unless its fundamental cause, unemployment, is resolved.

Skills Requirements

The effects of technology touch all aspects of our lives, particularly the workplace is being changed by technological advancements and competition from abroad. Qualification requirements

of the workforce is constantly changing. The danger for the present and future is not lack of jobs, but lack of technological skills. In fact, by the end of this century there may be a critical shortage of workers with the education and training necessary to handle the jobs that need to be filled (Bracy, 1996; Palwin, 1988). The nature of work has changed dramatically, requiring a workforce that is highly skilled and adaptive. Remaining low-skill jobs are gradually being replaced by jobs which require more language, mathematics, technology literacy, and problem solving skills. If this trend continues, too many workers will lack the required skills to perform more demanding jobs (US Department of Labor, 1994; US Department of Labor, 1989). An American Management Association (AMA) survey of more than 1,000 human resources managers warned that 22% of the job applicants tested for basic reading and math skills by respondent firms in 1989 were deficient in those skills; in most cases their deficiencies prevented them from being hired (Greenberg, 1989). A newly released survey conducted by the AMA revealed that, one in three job applicants tested in 1995 by major companies lacked sufficient reading and/or math skills to perform the jobs they sought. The survey found a 33.1 percent deficiency rate among applicants (Greenberg, 1996).

According to Greenberg (1989), "There are more than 27 million functionally illiterates in the nation. Additional millions with elementary reading skills are unable to learn job skills from manuals or instructional materials" (p. 5). Surprisingly, a survey conducted by the Educational Testing Services revealed that roughly 90 million Americans over age 16 are, as far as most workplaces are concerned, basically unfit for employment (Gray and Simpson, 1993).

Employability Skills

The work of the future will increasingly depend upon the ability of workers to receive,

understand, and make informed decisions on information and instructions. In the growing industries, more jobs will require high levels of reading, greater facility with numbers, and technological literacy. In the past, despite their illiteracy, individuals used to make a living working in manufacturing or other jobs that did not need basic skills. In recent years, many of these jobs have disappeared. Because an increasing number of jobs today are interdependent, employers look for those workers who display a balanced blend of technical and human relation skills.

In today's everchanging workplace, one of the most valuable lessons an employee can learn is the importance of continuously developing skills beyond those required for the performance of a specific job. Some competencies identified as "employability skills" are the key to surviving on the job because they enable an individual to prove his or her value to an organization. Employability skills include technological literacy, knowing how to learn, mathematical competency, computer literacy, communication, organization, problem-solving, sensitivity, judgment, concentration, adaptability, personal management, team work, personal values, task-related skills, maturity, a good work ethic, dependability, and leadership skills (Cobble, 1996; Poole and Zahn, 1993; Welter, 1989).

Today's employers seek entry-level workers who arrive with basic math and science, technical, problem-solving, decision-making skills, and the ability to apply academic concepts to specific tasks (Pritz, 1988; Verespej, 1991). Undoubtedly, unless the right education and training is provided to upgrade the skills of unemployed persons, it will be impossible to break the cycle of welfare dependency. To properly solve the unemployment problems faced by welfare recipients, the emphasis should be placed on developing employability skills, the skills required for

maintaining employment in the 21st century's economic enterprise system. Knowing how to develop employability skills is essential to the success of U.S. welfare system. In order to help recipients to emancipate from welfare dependency, there must be a commitment and willingness to invest in the education and training necessary to develop the skills they need for employment. In order to be effective, the welfare reform system should focus more on providing education, work-based training, and employability skills for welfare recipients.

Job-based Education

The main reason for swelling the AFDC's payrolls to 14 million in the last 25 years is that individuals who have not been able to meet the requirements of the labor market have been forced to leave the workplace and depend upon public assistance. Therefore, the development of emploability skills is vital to the successs of social welfare programs. The need for greater investment in ways of providing employability skills is pushing education and training issues to the forefront of welfare reform programs. Education and training for individuals provide employment opportunities, and the satisfaction of being a part of the world of work as productive citizens. For industry, education and training is synonymous with quality, productivity, and economic growth. For the U.S. social welfare system, the education that can develop required skills is paramount to solving the chronic socio-economic problems of welfare dependancy.

Kantor (1994) noted that, ". . . shifts in the occupational structure have increased the skill requirements of jobs and require reform in the educational system in order to overcome a critical skills shortage among American workers" (p. 450). Such reform should focus on the development of an integrated instructional program that applies academic skills in the context of an occupational area which is, indeed, vocational-technical education.

Vocational-Technical Education

A renewed national emphasis on facilitating the transition from school to work and from welfare to work has provided a historic opportunity for vocational-technical programs to bring about the kind of change that is needed to help people enter the ranks of gainfully employed citizens of this nation (Serratt, 1995). Vocational-technical education programs must restructure their curricula and delivery process at all levels in order to provide employability skills by integration of basic academic skills and vocational competencies. Pratzner (1993) pointed out that, "[Vocational] Programs must know what is required in today's and tomorrow's workplace and must set high expectations for achievement for all students" (p. 4). To meet the needs of all students for employability skills, vocational education programs should focus on reforming their curricula and instructional strategies for relevance and appropriateness. To accomplish this, vocational-technical education programs must center on providing students with employability skills in order to successfully perform in the world of work.

In order to provide employability skills for the recipients of public assistance, social welfare system must closely collaborate with vocational-technical programs at all levels. Obviously, to provide a useful and relevant education, vocational-technical institutions ought to be equipped with state-of-the-art technologies, responsive and progressive curriculum, and committed, experienced faculty.

Problem of the Study

The study was conducted to determine the basic skills needs of welfare recipients upon their enrollment in the social welfare system. Knowing the skill requirements of the labor market is important to the development of an effective work-based

educational program, but identification of *basic skill* needs of welfare recipients is vital to providing employability skills for these individuals. Reading, mathematics, and language skills are essential to the development of higher order occupational skills such as problem-solving, interpersonal communication, and technical skills. It seems impossible for an individual who is unable to read manuals, or solve a simple math problem to develop employability skills without first improving deficiencies in basic skills. Therefore, an assessment of basic skills needs of welfare recipients is fundamental to the success of the welfare reform system.

Method

The study sought to identify the basic skills needs of the welfare recipients enrolled in the JOBS program of the Ohio's Wood County Department of Human Services. The study was conducted in two steps: (1) basic skills knowledge level of individuals upon their enrollment in the JOBS program was assessed, and (2) relative to the qualifications expected of high school graduates, basic skills needs of the participants were identified.

Procedure

The Survey Form Level A, Test of Adult Basic Education (TABS) was administered for a randomly selected sample of 39 clients of the Wood County Department of Human Services located in Bowling Green, Ohio. A total of 800 welfare recipients under AFDC entitlement were assigned to the JOBS program of Wood County Department of Human Services Work Center (0.8% of the Wood County's 100,000 population). The population of the study was composed of able unemployed adults who were eligible to receive public assistance under AFDC entitlement, but they were required to participate in the JOBS program.

The six-part survey form Test of Adult Basic Education has been standardized to

appropriately measure three content areas: reading, mathematics, and language skills (Bauernfeind, 1984). The reliability (Kuder-Richardson estimates) reported for the TABE is in the 0.80 to 0.90 range. As far as validity is concerned, the TABE has been promoted to predict scores on the high school equivalency GED tests (Test of Adult Basic Education Norms Book, 1987). The TABE was composed of three subject areas including six 15-item subtests as follow:

Reading Content

Vocabulary: Measure same-meaning and opposite-meaning words, words in context, multi-meaning words, and word affixes.

Comprehension tests: Measure skills in understanding passage details, character analysis, main ideas, generalizations, and ability to differentiate various forms of writing.

Mathematics Content

Mathematics computation tests: Measure the operation of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

Mathematics concepts and applications tests: Measure the reasoning skills needed for practical problem solving.

Language Content

Language mechanics tests: Measure capitalization and punctuation skills. Proofreading skills are measured in context of passages presented in various formulas.

Language expression tests: Measure skills in using various parts of speech, forming and organizing sentences and paragraphs, identifying and developing topic sentences, and writing for clarity (CTB Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Guide Book, 1990). The time allowed for the completion of the survey was 71 minutes (total reading, 22 minutes; total mathematics, 28 minutes; and total

language, 21 minutes). Norm tables were used to convert the number of correct answers to scale scores and their grade equivalent for three content areas: reading, mathematics, and language. The equal-interval property of the scale made scale scores appropriate for various statistical purposes (CTB Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Guide Book, 1990).

Results

After the TABE was administered and all 39 applicants completed the test, using the norm book the number of correct answers for each content area were converted to scale scores. The mean scale scores for each content area were calculated and converted to their grade equivalent as directed in the Norm Book.

Participants' Basic Skills Knowledge

Based on the grade equivalent level for each content area, the basic skills knowledge level of participants was determined as follow:

Reading: Individuals' typical grade level on reading skills was 10.7. That is, the sample's performance on the test was the same as typical students who have studied seven months in 10th grade.

Mathematics: The average subject's grade equivalent was 7.4. That is, a typical subject's performance on the mathematics skills of the test was the same as students who have completed four months in the 7th grade.

Language skills: The subjects' grade level was 6.8. That is, the typical sample's grade level on language skills was theoretically equivalent to the language level of an individual who has completed eight months in 6th grade.

Participants' Basic Skills Needs

Based on high school equivalency, basic skills needs of the subjects was identified as:

Reading: The typical participants theoretically needed more than two years instruction to overcome deficiencies in reading skills to qualify for obtaining a high school diploma.

Mathematics: The typical participants needed an equivalent of five years instruction in mathematics to qualify for obtaining a high school diploma.

Language skills: The typical participants needed more than five years instruction in language skills to acquire the basic skills qualifications expected of a typical high school graduate.

Implications

Because without sufficient knowledge of basic academic skills it is impossible to maximize individuals' talents and provide them with employability skills, welfare reform programs must seek collaboration with vocational-technical institutions in order to improve the recipients' basic academic skills within the context of an occupational area. This provides both an opportunity and a challenge for vocational-technical educators. The opportunity is that vocational-technical programs, as the most effective delivery system, will play a significant role in the welfare reform process. The challenge for all vocational-technical educators is to systematically update their curricula, upgrade their skills, and improve their methods of instruction in order to meet the needs of welfare recipients for basic academic and occupational skills.

At this critical time, vocational-technical programs are expected to be on the leading edge of technology, education, and skills delivery system. The perception that job-based education is inferior to academic subjects needs to be changed. Clearly, the success of any reform initiative in helping welfare recipients to become self-sufficient depends to a great extent on how well individuals are empowered to not only perform an occupation but also take control of their

jobs. This will not be accomplished unless the system is willing to invest in the education and training that is needed to provide the unemployed or underemployed persons the skills they need to become employable.

Based on the preceding considerations, it is recommended that public, private, and grant dollars be invested in the establishment and development of open access vocational-technical programs. Vocational-technical schools, if equipped with state-of-the-art technical means, flexible programs, and experienced faculty, will be able to provide a lasting solution to welfare problems by enabling the recipients of public assistance to develop employability skills. Using relevant educational technologies, state-of-the-art equipment, and practical work experience can lead to the improvement of individuals' learning styles and help them develop required employability skills.

Because the employment impact of lack of employability skills upon functionally illiterate adults cannot be denied, reform initiatives must focus efforts on providing welfare recipients with opportunities to improve everything from basic academic skills to self-confidence to employment prospects. To accomplish this, the U.S. social welfare system should seek closer collaboration with vocational-technical schools in order to provide employability skills for unemployed persons. Without a question, vocational-technical programs with an emphasis on education for employment can assist welfare recipients to gainfully enter the workforce and enjoy the emancipation from public dependency.

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